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Learning Our Freedom

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The North Carolina Civic Education Consortium provides professional development, resources, and inspiration to those who teach civic education. The Consortium's community-based approach engages students and teachers in issues that affect their lives.

LEARNING OUR FREEDOM

Over the past three years, several events have drawn attention to the startling state of civic education in North Carolina.

- Local government officials, alarmed by low turnout in elections and public hearings, asked the Institute of Government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to help bridge the gap between citizens and government.

- City and county managers were frustrated that teachers had little incentive to call on community resources or to use "non-approved" curriculum materials.

- Several nonprofits, such as Kids Voting and the Partnership for Character Education, were born in response to declining emphasis on civic-related curricula.

- A statewide survey of civic education in North Carolina, conducted by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, found that a majority of middle level and high school students considers civics irrelevant, boring, and unnecessary. As one high school student stated, "I go through class and wonder why should I care about this. What does it mean to me?" >>

BY INGRID FLORY AND DEBRA HENZEY

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Students at Leesburg Rd. High School present their findings on local school assignment and redistricting to members of the school board, parents, and peers (see story on page 26).

Adding fuel to the fire, just 64 percent of North Carolina high school students scored at or above a grade D+ in civics on the final course test in 1998. And, during the major elections of 1996, just 48 percent of eligible 18 to 24-year-olds actually registered to vote. Of those registered, just 32.7 percent actually voted—the worst record of any age group.

Unfortunately, this alarming state of civic education and civic participation is prevalent not only in North Carolina, but also throughout the country. Studies commissioned by the National Association of Secretaries of State and the National Commission on Civic Renewal report similar results across the nation. And the Nation's Civic Report Card, released in November 1999 by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, shows that some of the problem originates in our classrooms.

Concerned about the decline in civic participation, North Carolina public officials urged local organizations and agencies to work together to make civics relevant to the lives of today's youth. A failure to do this, they warned, would threaten the future of democratic government in our communities. In 1997, the Institute of Government (housed at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) met with 20 partner organizations to organize a collaborative statewide consortium on civic education. Organizations such as the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners and the

North Carolina League of Municipalities banded together with individual schools and community-based organizations to create the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium.

Building Partnerships and Resources

The Consortium was conceived as a clearinghouse for good ideas that would share resources and successful civic education programs with its partners across the state and provide support for teachers and school administrators. Already, more than 150 organizations and individuals have become active partners of the Consortium, including schools, teachers, administrators, and others in the education arena. The diversity of Consortium partners allows the organization to take on a wide variety of projects, each of which utilizes the expertise of various partners.

Two of its four active work groups focus specifically on the needs of classroom teachers. The Professional Development Work Group helps teachers and community partners develop skills and strategies for civic education within the existing curriculum guidelines. A top priority project involved launching a successful Summer Institute for 31 ninth and tenth-grade civics teachers in July 1999. The Classroom Support Work Group brings issue-based, interactive civics resources to the classroom by supporting existing programs and developing new programs as needed. This led



Teachers attending the Consortium's Summer Institute collaborated to put new life and meaning into their required civics classes with issue-based lessons.

Police officers invited teachers to ride along with them as they patrolled the streets, and professors of law coached teachers in how to conduct mock court trials in the classroom.

to the development of a comprehensive website primarily for teachers and a pilot "town meeting" activity.

Two other work groups also benefit schools and educators. The Community-Based Education Work group seeks to strengthen civic education opportunities outside the school (to reinforce and build on in-school learning) and the Public Support Work Group strives to win new partners and advocates for civic education.

Summer Institute for Civics Teachers

The Consortium supports innovative civics curricula by enhancing the professional development of civics educators. Social studies and civics teachers identified three primary obstacles to using interactive, community-based teaching in the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation survey of civics teachers.

- Teachers felt they lacked the confidence to guide students in exploring and finding answers to complex policy questions. They also felt they lacked a broad understanding of the state and local governments' roles in making and implementing policies, and thus could not teach through the use of local issues.

- Teachers expressed concern about using community leaders in the classroom. They wanted guidance on who to contact to provide specific types of information and support for their classroom and how to coach community resource people so their time with students would be meaningful.

- Teachers cited a need for increased support for interactive teaching methods from their administrators. They said that principals, curriculum supervisors, and school superintendents frequently lacked experience with interactive teaching and, therefore, did not understand how it can enhance learning and test scores or meet required course objectives. The teachers felt that they needed explicit support from their administration before they would expend time designing new teaching techniques.

In response to these findings, the Consortium sponsored its first annual weeklong training for 31 ninth-grade teachers who were required high school civics course, "Economic, Legal and Political Systems in Action" (ELPSA), in July 1999. The Institute focused on helping teachers develop the skills and knowledge to confidently guide students through activities that address local issues and utilize community leaders. To ensure administration support, applicants were required to have a letter of endorsement from their school principals. In

addition, the workshops featured "real world" participants, including police officers, local government officials, attorneys, and community activists. They participated in role-playing and other activities on gun control, school uniforms, and criminal justice and shared their expertise by discussing real life scenarios.

Police officers invited teachers to ride along with them as they patrolled the streets, and professors of law coached teachers in how to conduct mock court trials in the classroom. The teachers embraced the workshop's interactive, community-based approach: "It is amazing how much more energy I have today since I feel more actively engaged in my learning. Good point to remember in my class!" Another said, "Issue-based teaching will demonstrate to the students how ELPSA is already present in their lives, answering the question: 'Why do we have to learn this stuff?'"

The Summer Institute was just the first step in a year-long program for the teacher participants. Before leaving the program, teachers developed units that applied the interactive model to issues in their homes or communities. These units will eventually be developed into an integrated course of study. Twenty-four of the teachers met again in late October to share their unit plans and give feedback to others. As of October, more than half of the teachers were already using the teaching model they learned at the Institute, and 95 percent planned to use it before the end of the school year. As teachers from the Summer Institute develop successful activities and lesson plans, the Consortium will make them available to teachers throughout North Carolina and the nation, both on paper and on the Consortium's website (<http://ncinfo.iog.unc.edu/programs/civiced>).

Classroom Support

The Classroom Support Work Group has developed several programs to help teachers gain access to high-quality resources and activities. The most highly-rated project, Citizen I Am (CIA), was developed by two teachers at Southwest Middle School in High Point, but the activity will be replicated at the high school level in 2000. Using the concept of a town meeting as a unifying point, teachers Pam Myrick and Sharon Pearson worked with James Ingram, assistant principal, to develop a classroom model that allows students to actively examine, debate, evaluate, and respond to an important local issue. The sixth and eighth graders from >>

MAKING CIVICS MEANINGFUL

Educating the new millennium student will take more than the standard course of study. To create insight, teachers must somehow reshape secondary curricula in a way that excites the students, the consumers. The education of citizens who are honest, trustworthy, responsible, caring, and concerned must move beyond the classroom and into the real work setting. After all, if you want a student to truly learn a subject, you must somehow elevate their involvement. Action research is really the only way to get involved, but where will the time, planning, resources, etc., come from? A project called Citizen I Am (CIA), designed by Pam Myrick and Sharon Pearson with the support of the Civic Education Consortium, meets the learning styles of all students through active participation and cooperative problem solving. It takes the student out of the classroom and changes the role of teacher to that of coach.

CIA allows students to examine local, state, national, or international issues. Students gather information from a variety of sources and use the information to make decisions, solve problems, and plan a local course of action. Involvement in the project promotes competent and responsible participation in state and local government while

encouraging civic participation among students. The class project culminates in a portfolio presented in a simulated town meeting with community officials.

The students in Myrick and Pearson's class chose to study the controversial siting of Federal Express' new airport hub at the Piedmont Triad International Airport. This decision by local officials had a direct impact on the school, students, and parents because of the proposed runway's proximity to the school and neighborhoods. Studies indicate that a hub of this size can turn a rural town into a metropolis, bringing in millions of dollars and lots of new jobs, industry, and all that follows. But when it threatens the livelihood and simple way of life of a town and the possible destruction of several neighborhoods, the battle lines are drawn.

To prepare for the final town meeting, the students researched the issue, read newspapers and other articles, toured the airport, and interviewed community officials, including the city planner, an environmentalist, homeowners, and members of the Chamber of Commerce. A local attorney helped students understand some of the key legal concepts involved, such as eminent domain and "just" compensation. The project culminated in 170 students from sixth and eighth

grades convening in the town hall chambers for a mock town meeting moderated by the mayor of High Point. Students formed caucuses and outlined and defended their positions at the town meeting under the watchful eye of education majors from nearby Bennett College who served as pages. After the meeting, students cast their ballots on the referendum questions in voting booths set up by the High Point Board of Elections, endorsing development by a two-to-one margin.

As Myrick and Pearson developed this interdisciplinary unit, they ensured that learning experiences were connected to the required elements of the Standard Course of Study. They also incorporated concepts from Paideia seminars (discussions guided by open-ended questions), writing across the curriculum, character education, and exercises to develop critical thinking skills.

This model has the potential to invigorate the classroom learning environment, giving a shot in the arm to teachers who want to actively involve students in real life community-based topics and away from rote textbook activities. It empowers students to become involved in community issues and shows them how they can affect local policy.

BY JAMES INGRAM

these classes also were able to explore concepts and practice skill required for social studies and language arts. (See sidebar above.)

Eric Beerbohm, a Marshall Fellow with Duke University's Kenan Ethics Program, developed an evaluation survey that was administered before and after this town meeting activity. The results show that the interactive project was a

huge success. "The experience persuaded a majority of students of the necessity of participating in the civic process, the value of youth in community problem solving, and the capacity of citizens to monitor and influence decisions of their representatives," Beerbohm concluded. His survey also showed that the model fostered increased tolerance, conveying to students that disagreement is okay and that it

need not mean deadlock or animosity.

Some of more dramatic results of the evaluation come from responses to these statements:

- I talk with friends about problems in the community—up 91 percent after the town meeting
- Citizens can monitor and influence decisions of their representatives—up 56 percent
- My parents and I discuss government decisions—up 84 percent
- I hope to influence the political structure someday—up 77 percent.

Online Help for Teachers

The Consortium's website (<http://ncinfo.iog.unc.edu/programs/civiced>) offers model lesson plans and wide variety of support services for educators and youth leaders. The site also includes a directory of community resources for civic education in each North Carolina county, where civics educators can find local community leaders and officials who are committed to civic education and who can provide information or participate in classroom activities.

In addition, the site provides information and tutorials on how to obtain grants for pilot projects, links to professional development opportunities, free online lesson plans, and a section just for youth, with links to activities and support services for youth leaders. The contact person for the website is Joy Lewis at: lewis@iogmail.iog.unc.edu

Grants and Community Programs

To foster and reward top-notch civic education programming, the Consortium created the Civic Education Small Grants Program, sponsored jointly by the Consortium and the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation. In 1999, the first \$75,000 in funding allowed the Consortium to award grants to 14 outstanding civics programs. Funds received ranged from \$1,000–\$10,000. A grant review committee, composed of students, teachers, and community partners, selected projects based on established criteria, which include those embracing collaboration with various partners and offering opportunities for continuation and replication.

Some of the selected projects will allow students and their teachers to learn firsthand how government works, as they shadow government officials and conduct mock legislative hearings. Other programs will help teachers develop student-led activities, such as youth court hearings or the construction of a student government website. In all, the projects supported through the first year of the Small Grants Program will directly involve 9,000–11,000 young people, 363 educators, and 398 community leaders across North Carolina. During the coming year, the Consortium will monitor these 14 projects and share important lessons

learned across the state. A new pool of \$50,000 provided by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation will allow the Consortium to sponsor another round of grants in 2000.

On the Agenda

The Consortium's strategic plan shows several new initiatives on the horizon, including:

- **Civic Index:** The Public Support Work Group has developed a list of possible measures to gauge how citizenship is faring in North Carolina. The adult version of the index is more developed because many of the measures (voter turnout rates, number of people seeking public offices, etc.) are already collected by various organization. However, the Youth Civic Index will define the potential impact of the Consortium's activities and provide statistical support for those eager to support reform or refinement of civic education in schools. The Consortium will flesh out the Youth Civic Index during the first half of 2000, with the hopes that it can be funded and implemented later this year. This index could serve as a model for other states interested in tracking youth civic education.

- **Youth Summit:** The Consortium is working with the State Department of Public Instruction, 4-H Youth Development, and the N.C. Office of Youth Advocacy and Involvement to sponsor a survey and youth summit for middle level and high school students in 30 counties affected by the hurricanes of 2000. This summit will be the only coordinated effort to get input from youth concerning the relief efforts and rebuilding of their communities, but organizers hope it will be a working model for youth involvement in future statewide or regional disasters or crises.

- **Teachers' Guidebook:** Pending approval of funding, the Consortium will develop a comprehensive guidebook for teachers featuring an array of civics activities and lesson plans, such as the Citizen I Am town meetings, mock trials, and activities developed by our Summer Institute graduates. The guidebook will incorporate required elements for the North Carolina Standard Course of Study at various grade levels. Forms, worksheets, sample letters, and similar items will be provided on diskette or from the website. The guidebook should be available in mid-2001.

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